



## U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

### Seaman Apprentice William R. Flores, USCG



*Coast Guard presents its highest service medal  
to a Hispanic hero*

---

(The following article is a transcribed copy of a September, 2000 Official Coast Guard Press Release.)

A Coast Guard hero who died while saving the lives of many of his shipmates when his cutter sank will receive the Coast Guard's highest service medal posthumously in a ceremony near Ft. Worth, Texas, Sept. 16, 2000. The family of Seaman Apprentice William R. Flores will receive his Coast Guard Medal at 10 a.m. at the Benbrook Cemetery, Benbrook, Texas, near his gravesite. Flores' family selected the date in part because it is a day of honor for many Hispanics - a celebration of Mexico's fight for independence from Spain. The Coast Guard's 8th District Commander, Rear Admiral Paul Pluta, and the service's top enlisted member, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Vince Patton, will be among the officials on hand to honor Seaman Apprentice Flores. The ceremony is open to the media.



# U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Flores and 22 other Coast Guardsmen perished in the sinking of the Coast Guard Cutter *Blackthorn* on January 28, 1980. The *Blackthorn* and the tanker *Capricorn* collided near the entrance to Tampa Bay, Florida. The *Blackthorn* capsized before all the cutter's crew could abandon ship. Twenty-seven of Flores' shipmates did escape the sinking ship.

After the ships collided Flores and another crewmember threw lifejackets to their shipmates who had jumped into the water. Later, when his companion abandoned ship as the *Blackthorn* began to submerge, Flores--who was less than a year out of boot camp--remained behind and used his own belt to strap open the lifejacket locker door, allowing additional lifejackets to float to the surface. Even after most crewmembers abandoned ship, the [18]-year-old Flores remained aboard to assist trapped shipmates and to comfort those who were injured and disoriented.

"Seaman Apprentice Flores demonstrated extraordinary courage and devotion to duty, particularly in light of his youth and limited shipboard experience," said Master Chief Patton.

The Coast Guard's recognition of Flores' heroism comes after his surviving shipmates and several retired Coast Guardsmen reviewed the records of the collision and realized that Flores' actions had not been formally honored.

The *Blackthorn* was a 180-foot buoy tender that was commissioned on March 27, 1944. In addition to aids to navigation, the cutter's other assignments included icebreaking on the Great Lakes, search-and-rescue missions along the California coastline, and the rescuing of survivors involved in air and sea disasters along the Gulf Coast.

---

## **"Getting His Due: CG Hero Receives Honor Posthumously"**

The following narrative is a transcribed copy of an article published in the December, 2000 issue of the magazine *Coast Guard*, pages 30-33.

Twenty years ago, a young Coast Guardsman from Benbrook, Texas, sacrificed his life to help his shipmates in the frantic minutes after their 180-foot cutter collided with a 605-foot oil tanker near the entrance of Tampa Bay, Fla.

The actions of Seaman Apprentice William Ray "Billy" Flores were somehow overlooked as officials investigated the worst peacetime disaster in Coast Guard history.



## U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

But a few officers didn't forget. They pushed the Coast Guard to formally recognize Flores' heroism and, the morning Sept. 16 [2000], Flores was honored posthumously with the Coast Guard Medal, the service's highest award for heroism not involving combat.

His parents, Robert and Julia Flores of Benbrook, accepted the award at a ceremony in Benbrook Cemetery as their six surviving children and other relatives looked on.

Flores, [18], had only been in the Coast Guard a few months when the cutter Blackthorn collided nearly head on with the tanker Capricorn on the evening of Jan. 28, 1980. Flores and another crew member, Larry Clutter, had stayed aboard to throw life jackets to some of their shipmates who had jumped into the water.

When the Blackthorn began to sink, Clutter abandoned ship, but Flores stayed put. He used his belt to strap open the life jacket locker door so more life jackets could float to the surface. He also assisted trapped shipmates and comforted others who were injured and disoriented, Coast Guard officials said.

Despite Flores' efforts, 23 crewmembers died. "Seaman Apprentice Flores' exceptional fortitude, remarkable initiative and courage throughout this tragic incident were instrumental in saving many lives," said Rear Adm. Paul Pluta, the Coast Guard's 8th District commander.

"His example is all the more notable when one considers his youth and lack of experience," Pluta said. "He set the standard for us all and embodies the true spirit of what we stand for."

The family selected Sept. 16, Dieciseis de Septiembre, for the medal ceremony because it's a day of honor for Hispanics. It commemorates the beginning of Mexico's fight for independence from Spain.

About 100 people attended the ceremony near Flores' grave, among them Benbrook Mayor Felix Hebert. Coast Guard BMC David Saucedo, who recruited Flores, and retired BMCM Alan Nations, who promised Flores' parents more than a decade ago that he would do everything in his power to see to it that their son received recognition.

Flores was one of dozens of new members to report for duty aboard the Galveston-based ship, which was acting as a buoy tender on the day of the collision, said Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Vince Patton, the service's top enlisted member. Many crewmembers did not even know each other, he said.



## U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

"Many of the survivors told the same story. Patton said. "They said they would not be alive if it were not for one of the new crewmembers. They couldn't remember his name, though."

In the ensuing investigation into the accident's cause, Flores' actions somehow slipped through the cracks. But Clutter and Nations, based in Galveston at the time of the accident, repeatedly contacted Coast Guard officials to report that Flores had not been formally honored.

"I can't explain why it took so long," said Nations, who lives in Kentucky. "What really matters is the Coast Guard's action today."

Patton said his staff conducted an extensive investigation, poring through transcripts from survivors, administrative records, newspaper clippings and other documents.

The Flores family had prayed and waited patiently for many years for their son to be honored. "I think it's a wonderful thing that the Coast Guard has done for our son," an emotional Robert Flores said. "We are so very grateful."

Billy Flores attended Western Hills High School and was proud to be in the Coast Guard, said his sister, Carolyn Ahlstrom, who flew from Seattle to attend the ceremony. He loved wearing the uniform, she said.

"It was just his nature to help others," said his brother, Richard Flores, 40, who lives in Fort Worth. "That's just how he was. We're very proud of him."

---